

***Sponsored Supplement***  
**A Changing Landscape for School Food**  
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Sandra to speak at monthly principal meetings where she could explain the transformation of food service and ask for principals' support as allies and advocates for better school food. She did, and they stepped up. Additionally, after the assistant superintendent reached out to the community to support the district's students, Sandra saw a marked increase in attendance at the Wellness Committee meetings she had been doggedly hosting for parents and other interested district residents for several years. The committee, in turn, began to engage a diverse group of school community representatives such as teachers, administrators, coaches, parents, and school employee union leaders to seriously address ways to comply with federal regulations while mak-

ing the healthy choice the easy choice for students and staff. The network of partnerships forming within the school district and the community was wonderful to see.

We experienced similarly positive outcomes in other districts in Santa Barbara County. We had begun by supporting food service, the most powerless faction in the school community. And elevating the professionalism and capabilities of food service did produce better school food in many districts. But working with a broad network of partners seeded deep-rooted systemic change, helping schools and districts see themselves as centers of health and wellness, bolstering their efforts to improve student learning and lifetime health.

Our experience with Mark taught us

to work with the willing, and working with Sandra reinforced for us some essential tenets of partnership. Progress had nothing to do with money or power or authority—top-down pressure works only as long as pressure can be maintained; it is the antithesis of sustainability. Rather, progress was achieved through the day-to-day work of building relationships that transcend the roles of grantee and grantor, listening to our partners' concerns, and developing alternative solutions.

Developing a partnership based on aligned values, earned trust, and shared risk made it possible to change the food on the plate and the culture of the school district and community, supporting students' lifetime health and learning. ☺

## A Changing Landscape for School Food

BY JESSICA DONZE BLACK

**F**lash back to 1946: World War II is over and the United States is making plans for a brighter future. Among our country's top priorities is raising healthy children to support and defend our nation in the years ahead. Enter the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, a bold commitment to ensure that all young people have at least one nutritious meal each day.

Today, nearly 70 years later, the national lunch program remains a critical contributor to the health of school-age children, reaching 95 percent of public schools and more than 30 million kids a day. About 15 million children also participate in the national school breakfast program. The importance of these meals cannot be overstated, yet recently they became a topic of some controversy.

For decades, school meal programs focused on serving children enough food to prevent hunger. But as the childhood obesity epidemic grew, and related diseases such as Type 2 diabetes increased, public health groups and nutrition scientists recommended that meals provide students with the nutrients for healthy development while avoiding excess calories, fat, and sodium.

When the US Congress last reauthorized school meal programs in 2010, it heeded this advice and directed the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update nutrition standards to reflect current scientific knowledge. Congress also told the USDA to update nutrition standards for all foods sold at schools (in vending machines, à la carte lines, and school stores). The USDA issued updated regulations for lunch, breakfast, snack foods, and drinks that increased the emphasis on fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and set reasonable limits on fat, sodium, and portion sizes.

Schools have been implementing these updates since 2012, and the ease of the transition has varied considerably from district to district. Many schools were ahead of the curve and had

already met or exceeded the updated standards. But some were less prepared and have faced hurdles such as declining student participation rates, increased training and equipment needs, and limited availability of healthier products.

There is tremendous opportunity to overcome these challenges and move forward productively. According to a recent poll by The Pew Charitable Trusts, nearly three in four parents support the healthier school nutrition standards. Moreover, thousands of districts are implementing them successfully, and the USDA has launched an initiative to match struggling food service directors with peer mentors from districts that are thriving under the healthier standards. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the National School Food Service Management Institute, and other nonprofits are offering robust technical assistance and training to schools in need, and Congress has appropriated additional funds to upgrade school kitchen equipment. Groups representing fresh produce growers have worked with business and nonprofit partners to supply thousands of free salad bars to school cafeterias. The food industry has developed countless products that will help schools meet the healthier standards.

And here's the great news: These initiatives are working. As of 2015, 95 percent of districts are certified as meeting the updated nutrition standards, and students are adapting to the changes. Research indicates that in districts that have implemented healthier nutrition standards, students are eating more fruits and vegetables, and the amount of food left on plates has stayed level or even decreased. Although a few federal, state, and local policy makers have proposed rolling back the current nutrition standards, the overwhelming evidence shows that schools can successfully serve healthier foods for a reasonable cost, and fulfill the goal of the school meal program: to ensure that all children have access to healthy food every day. ☺

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